

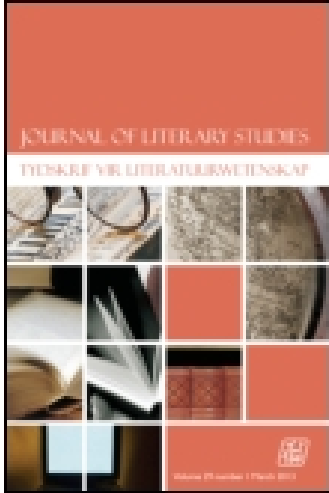
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## The Archaeology of Rock Art and Western Philosophy

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# The Archaeology of Rock Art and Western Philosophy<sup>1</sup>

**R.A. Northover**

## Summary

The article aims to excavate some layers of Western philosophy in order to see how far Western thinkers can illuminate aspects of prehistoric rock art. It will focus on David Lewis-Williams's neuropsychological and shamanistic theory of San and prehistoric rock art, attempting to supplement his emphasis on states of consciousness with a focus on volition. The article thereby aims to theorise, in metaphysical terms, what the shamans may have been attempting to do in their trance dances and rock art. Just as Lewis-Williams argues that the traditional archaeological focus on intellect, instrumental rationality and alert consciousness cannot do full justice to an understanding of important aspects of prehistoric human culture and behaviour, particularly their art, so this article purposes to show the importance of volition in this respect. Implicit in this article, therefore, is a critique of the rationalism of the mainstream Western philosophical tradition. The excavation will thus begin with a consideration of the Platonic bedrock of Western philosophy – emphasising Plato's archaic spiritualism – before moving on to Nietzsche's recent followers, and then to a consideration of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. It will be argued that these two philosophers of the will can helpfully illuminate certain aspects of shamanistic trance dances and rock art.

## Opsomming

Die artikel poog om sekere lae van Westerse filosofie op te diep om te sien in hoeverre Westerse denkers lig kan werp op aspekte van prehistoriese rotskuns. Die artikel fokus op David Lewis-Williams se neuropsigologiese en sjamanistiese teorie van San- en prehistoriese rotskuns in 'n poging om sy beklemtoning van bewussynstate met 'n fokus op wil te supplementeer. Die artikel poog daarby om in metafisiese terme te teoretiseer wat sjamane moontlik ten doel gehad het met hulle transdansen en rotskuns. Op dieselfde wyse wat Lewis-Williams argumenteer dat die tradisionele argeologiese fokus op intellek, instrumentale rasionaliteit en waaksame bewussyn nie ten volle reg laat geskied aan die verstaan van belangrike aspekte van

1. The Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) of the University of the Witwatersrand kindly allowed three images to be used in this article. The fourth image is the author's own. RARI does not necessarily subscribe to the views expressed in the article.

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prehistoriese menslike kultuur, gedrag en veral kuns nie, so beoog hierdie artikel om op die belangrikheid van wil in dié opsig te wys. Daarom word daar implisiet in hierdie artikel kritiek gelewer op die rasionalisme van die hoofstroom Westerse filosofiese tradisie. Dié opgraving sal begin met 'n beskouing van die Platoniese kern van Westerse filosofie – met nadruk op Plato se argaïese spiritualisme – voordat aanbeweeg word na Nietzsche se resente navolgers en vervolgens na 'n beskouing van Nietzsche en Schopenhauer. Daar sal aangevoer word dat hierdie twee filosowe van die wil op 'n hulpvaardige wyse lig kan werp op sekere aspekte van sjamanistiese transdansen en rotskuns.

## Introduction

This article will excavate some layers of Western philosophy to engage with David Lewis-Williams's neuropsychological approach to understanding some aspects of some prehistoric rock art,<sup>2</sup> focusing on the San, an aboriginal hunter-gatherer people indigenous to southern Africa. In particular, the article aims to see how far Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's philosophies of the will and of art can help to explain, in metaphysical terms, what the shamans might have been attempting to do when entering trance states, and could help to provide a more philosophical understanding of what the spirit world could be. Lewis-Williams argues (2002: 112, 121) that the traditional rationalistic approach to understanding prehistoric humans is unnecessarily limited by its focus on the technological and problem-solving activities of early humans, that is, its study is limited to the intellect and the alert section of the spectrum of consciousness. He argues (pp. 121-125) that, in order to get a more complete picture of prehistoric humans, researchers have to take into account the less rational, more emotive, even autistic aspects of the spectrum of consciousness, and that prehistoric rock art cannot be fully understood without this focus. This article aims to contribute to Lewis-Williams's approach by extending the debate from an exploration of consciousness and cognition to an investigation of volition.

Lewis-Williams depicts the spectrum of consciousness as a line, with alert problem-solving consciousness on the left, bifurcating halfway, the top branch indicating the intensified trajectory of trance states and the lower branch indicating the normal trajectory of hypnogogic states, dreaming and unconsciousness (2002: 125; 2004: 31). Since his theory involves cognitive states, volition does not appear on Lewis-Williams's diagram, and, although he discusses the *supernatural* in the conclusion of *The Mind in the Cave* (p. 290), he does not connect this concept with the will but rather associates it

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2. While not denying the varied and important contributions of various other rock art specialists to understanding prehistoric and San rock art, this article focuses on the neuropsychological aspect of David Lewis-Williams's theory, which he believes helps to illuminate some aspects of some rock art. This is supplemented by the work of the American archaeologist David Whitley.

with altered states of consciousness. It will be argued that the supernatural or spirit world can alternatively be understood to be *noumenal*, that is, to have a metaphysical basis in the will rather than in merely illusory altered states of consciousness. The term *noumenal* is preferred to the term *numinous*, since, as Lewis-Williams commented (personal communication), the San had no sense of the holy or the sacred. The first part of this article will outline Lewis-Williams's theory of prehistoric rock art and the second will explore to what extent the two philosophers, as well as some of Nietzsche's twentieth-century followers, can further illuminate the rock art and provide a metaphysical (or, to coin a new term, *noumenological*) understanding of both San myth and rock art. The philosophical excavation will start with Socrates and Plato before moving on to more recent thinkers and then move backwards in time towards Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, both of whom privileged art above science.

## Part 1: The Archaeology of Prehistoric Rock Art

### 1.1 Spiritualist Background

The rationalistic or modern scientific approach to archaeology grew out of the rationalism of Descartes and the Enlightenment. It did, however, have earlier roots in ancient Greece, in particular in the optimistic rationalism of Socrates, whom Nietzsche blamed for the demise of Ancient Greek tragedy and its pessimistic world view (1956: 77). It should be noted, though, that a spiritualist understanding of the world dominated much of Western history, that the Greek rationalist tradition was exceptional in the ancient world, and that the modern, materialist scientific approach is relatively new (with the exception of Democritus). It will be argued, endorsing Lewis-Williams's view, that Socrates' optimistic rationalism (the attitude of modern science) cannot do complete justice to the emotional and volitional complexity of prehistoric rock art, although Lewis-Williams himself firmly favours science (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2005: 287-290).

The article will explore prehistoric rock art in terms of both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's theories of will which will hopefully illuminate the key concept of "potency" that Lewis-Williams applies to rock art which the /Xam called *!gi:xa* and the Ju/'hoansi called *n/om* (Lewis-Williams & Challis 2011: 39-42). Their theories will be found to be relevant not just to the rock art but also to the trance dance to which it is closely related. While the later Nietzsche distanced himself from Schopenhauer, the early Nietzsche was profoundly influenced by him, particularly in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* (1956). Further philosophical excavation will reveal how Schopenhauer is necessary for a fuller understanding of Nietzsche, and Kant for both. Martha Nussbaum makes a

similar point: “Far too few accounts of Nietzsche’s thought pause to give any exegesis of Schopenhauer’s central notions and arguments – with the result that even the most attentive reader is not put in a position to grasp the origins of a term, the significance of a reference” (2006: 345).

Lewis-Williams has cautioned about the application of Western conceptions and theories of art, with all their preconceived ideas and assumptions, to prehistoric rock art, and has even questioned the appropriateness of the term “art” in this context, preferring the term “image-making” (2002: 41). Nonetheless, as Whitley argues (2001: 22-23), the term “rock art” is part of the tradition of archaeology and the term “art” even in the Western tradition is not monolithic but consists of diverse, and even conflicting, conceptions. This article hopes to show, without disrespecting the uniqueness of the art, how particular Western philosophers may contribute to understanding prehistoric rock art.

Despite his respect for the complexity of prehistoric rock art, Lewis-Williams considers confusing altered states of consciousness with travelling to the spirit world to be superstition. He does so explicitly using Plato’s metaphor of prisoners confined in a cave, mistaking shadows of things for reality, unable to see true things illuminated outside by the sun (2002: 204-205). Nonetheless, despite Plato’s rationalism, his own spiritualism should be noted. In the *Phaedrus* §245-246 (1973: 49), Plato puts forward a complex argument for the immortality of the soul (or spirit) – which Aristotle and Aquinas later echo in their cosmological arguments for a Prime Mover and First Cause – which assumes that all motion in the universe is ultimately caused by spirit (or soul) and that matter cannot move itself. Also, in the *Symposium* §202d-203a (1994: 43-44), Plato argues that Eros is a spirit that mediates between man and god, mortal and immortal, natural and supernatural, arguing that opposites cannot meet except through the mediation of a third term. This is interestingly echoed by Lewis-Williams when he notes, mentioning structuralism’s requirement of a middle term to mediate between binary opposites, that, in San society, the new maiden (a girl who has menstruated for the first time), like the shaman, mediates between this world and the spirit world, and is thus important for accessing supernatural potency (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004: 163). Indeed, the mediating power of the third term (the principle of the triad) can be seen in how often events and figures appear in groups of three throughout the myths of the Maluti Bushmen recorded by William Orpen (1874), a magistrate in the early Cape Colony who, in his personal capacity, recorded San myth and rock art. In the *Republic of Plato* §440e-441a (1968: 120), Plato argues that without the third term “spirit” to break the deadlock (that is, to mediate) between the opposition of reason and appetite, the soul would be paralysed, unable to act. It is argued in this article that Plato’s theories of the soul or spirit were early attempts to understand volition, as were shamanic trance dances and rock art.

## 1.2 Lewis-Williams's Shamanistic Theory of Prehistoric Rock Art

Lewis-Williams and Challis's (2011) approach to interpreting San rock art avoids any preconceived mythological or mythical scheme. Instead, they use the three registers of what they call the key, or Rosetta Stone, of San culture, namely the rock art images; the accounts of the paintings and etchings by San in the nineteenth century; and collected San mythology and cosmology (2011: 8). They show how San myth was related to ritual in the form of performances, particularly the trance dance. In addition to this, Lewis-Williams (2002: 126-130) draws on laboratory-based scientific neurological research to corroborate his claim that at least some (if not all) of the rock art is an attempt to depict altered states of consciousness experienced by shamans during their trance dances rather than merely an attempt to represent scenes from the daily lives of the San. Furthermore, he extrapolates, with scientific caution, from the rock art of southern Africa to the prehistoric rock art of Europe, North America and Australia. In fact, shamanism, arguably the key to rock art, is evident in all hunter-gatherer societies and is based on a neurological structure common to all humans. This interpretation is endorsed by the American archaeologist David Whitley (2009: 50, 183) who has corroborated it using ethnographic records about North American shamans.

The prehistoric rock paintings were most probably attempts by shamans to facilitate what they imagined to be their entry into the spirit world, via trance states, to harness supernatural potency for various purposes (Lewis-Williams 2002: 139-141). The paintings were thus an expression of a complex and sophisticated world view which included a three-tiered cosmos and a belief in a spirit world beyond the surface of the rock face upon which the paintings were made (pp. 145, 148-149). The surface of the rocks, including their protrusions and cracks, were integral parts of the rock art (p. 193), as were the locations of the caves in which the paintings were made. In Europe, the paintings were made in deep, dark caves (which were difficult to access) and must have been painted by torchlight. Lewis-Williams, alluding to Plato's image of the cave (pp. 204-205), argues that the caves themselves might depict the various stages of altered states of consciousness.

Lewis-Williams contends that the rock paintings represent the crucial moment in which humans discover consciousness (pp. 94, 130-135), although they appear to have confused altered states of consciousness with travelling to the spirit world. He argues that archaeologists and anthropologists have traditionally seen the rise of homo sapiens in terms of their intellect and rationality, in the tools and technologies they discovered and shaped to ensure their survival (p. 121). He argues, however, that prehistoric art (or image-making) and the use of symbols were just as, if not more, important to becoming human (p. 111). Nor does he limit consciousness to

alertness and self-awareness, but points out diverse forms of consciousness (dreaming, daydreaming, altered states of consciousness, and so on) (pp. 121-126; 2004: 30-32). Whitley adds that prehistoric rock art reveals not just the discovery of the mind – consciousness, self-consciousness and altered states of consciousness – but the discovery of emotion and volition too, a point to which this article will return later. Whitley also relates the creativity of North American shaman artists to mental disorders, in particular manic depression (2009: 238), and claims that shamanism is the most likely origin of religion and belief (p. 207). He cites Foucault’s ideas on madness being essential to the human species (pp. 244, 260).

Lewis-Williams also argues that the sophistication of European rock paintings might well be because homo sapiens in Europe used their capacity for art to differentiate themselves from Neanderthals (2002: 95-96, 99) who could imitate some of the new technologies and behaviour introduced by the homo sapiens, but not their rock painting. Whitley claims that, while the Neanderthals most probably perceived and believed in spirits too, humans differed from Neanderthals in that they – human shamans – learnt how to control the spirits: “Shamans were masters of the spirits because they were masters of the human mind” (2009: 254). According to Lewis-Williams, prehistoric rock art is also evidence of social stratification within human hunter-gatherer societies, indicative of power relations as much as of spiritual beliefs (2002: 196).

In many prehistoric cultures, the shamans made use of various plant substances to induce altered states of consciousness. The San, however, used the trance dance, a communal activity, to induce this state (2002: 141). With the San, the women would sit in a circle clapping hands and singing while men would circle them dancing until they entered altered states of consciousness (pp. 139-141). According to Whitley, however, shamans in North America were loners. They were considered dangerous but sometimes valuable outsiders who left the community to go to sacred places on vision quests to enter the spirit world alone in order to access the potency of this realm.

According to Lewis-Williams’s theory, the enigmatic geometric shapes (entoptics) evident in prehistoric rock art throughout the world indicate the first stage of altered states of consciousness as the shaman prepares to enter the spiritual or supernatural world (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989: 60-63). Neuroscientists have reproduced these effects in laboratory conditions, which corroborates Lewis-Williams’s shamanistic theory, since it implies that these experiences are common to all human beings, including early humans, as they share with modern humans a common neurological structure. These experiences are not only visual but also auditory, somatic and tactile, and even involve synaesthesia (the combining of senses). During the second stage, shamans interpret the geometrical images in terms of things familiar to their culture (see fig. 1, end of article), including the



animals in their environment. In southern Africa, the entoptics consisting of numerous dots are often interpreted as bees (fig. 2) and the hallucinatory visual experience of these dots is often accompanied by sounds of humming and prickling sensations on the skin, resembling bee stings. Bees and honey, like the fat and blood of the eland, were considered especially potent (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989: 64-65; Lewis-Williams 2002: 154). Between the second and third stages is an experience that can be described as a vortex, a tunnel with a light at the end of it. Sometimes entoptic images or images of animals appear in the walls of the vortex. Finally, there is the third stage when the shaman experiences becoming-animal, which may explain the therianthropes (half-animal, half-human figures) of the rock paintings (fig. 3). The depiction of fish (fig. 3) may indicate the sensation of being submerged in water that some shamans experience while in altered states of consciousness. Another sensation is that of flying, often indicated by images of birds or feathered arms.

In line with Deleuze and Guattari's idea of becoming-animal (to be discussed in more detail later) – “becoming is not to imitate or identify with something or someone” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 272) – shamans do not imitate or pretend to be an animal, or dream or imagine themselves to become animal; they literally experience becoming-animal, and it is also understood to be accompanied by a loss of self, even dying (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989: 50-51). Becoming-animal appears always to accompany the shamans' entering the third phase of the trance state. They are often depicted sharing the features of the animals they become. For instance, in San rock art, the shaman is often depicted as bleeding from the nose (fig. 3) or with crossed feet (sometimes hooves) as the hunted, dying eland often is. The trance state is painful and shamans are often depicted as bent double in pain and using sticks to keep upright. They describe how the energy boils in their bellies before exploding in their heads as they enter the altered states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams 2002: 139). Whitley (2009: 188) confirms the pain and fear felt by North American shamans as he dismisses the theory of ecstatic altered states, a point to which this article will return later. The cracks in the cave walls are considered to be portals to the spirit world. Animals and therianthropes are often depicted entering or exiting these cracks (fig. 3). The shamans enter the supernatural world to harness supernatural potency for various purposes, including healing the sick, bringing rain and fending off evil spirits. In order to enter the spirit world the shamans have to die and become a spirit (animal). Rain shamans enter the spirit world to capture the rain animal, a powerful beast, the spilt blood or milk of which produces rain (Lewis-Williams 2003: 67). In two of the images (figs 2 and 3), a line can be seen connecting the images and sometimes appearing to enter and exit the rock face. Lewis-Williams calls these “threads of light” (2004: 179) along which shamans travel to enter the

spirit world, which can be accessed, while the shaman is in a state of trance, through the rock face or through water holes (2004: 52-53).

Lewis-Williams argues that shamanistic rock paintings are not merely an attempt to represent everyday objects – whether natural objects or visions – but rather that the shamans “reached out to their emotionally charged visions and tried to touch them, to hold them in place, perhaps on soft surfaces and with their fingers. They were not inventing images. They were merely touching *what was already there*” (2002: 193; italics in original). The painted animals in the rock paintings are the painted images of the visions of spirit animals, rather than representations of natural animals. The spirit world is not transcendent but immanent, and the distinction between the natural and the spirit worlds is not rigid.

The preceding brief overview of Lewis-Williams’s understanding of prehistoric rock art is evidence of his deep respect for its complexity, which he claims to be as sophisticated as the Renaissance art tradition (2004: xxiii). Even Lewis-Williams, however, for all his sympathetic understanding of shamanism, ultimately considers the shamanistic belief in a supernatural order to be unfounded (2002: 205), no doubt, from his modern scientific materialist perspective. Although Lewis-Williams uses the terms “spirituality” and “supernatural world” he does not define or analyse these terms, which, according to this article, cannot simply be identified with states of consciousness, even altered states of consciousness, but rather with volition. The article will now attempt to provide a metaphysical explanation for the basis of the belief in a spirit- or a supernatural world.

## Part 2: The Archaeology of Philosophy

### 2.1 Nietzsche’s Recent Followers

The second part of this article considers what Western philosophy can contribute to research on prehistoric rock art. In doing so, it will continue its archaeology of philosophy that it started with Socrates and Plato, but now intends to work backwards from the present. The slightest excavation of the post-structuralist philosophy of Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze reveals the common strata of Nietzsche and two levels below that, the very important Kantian layer. Derrida takes Nietzsche’s subterranean man, or Orpheus in the darkness – as opposed to the light of Plato’s rational Sun – as his point of departure. Catherine Zuckert describes the postmodernists’ return to Plato as “an excavation project” inaugurated by Nietzsche (1996: 1). Foucault makes use of Nietzsche’s genealogical approach to morals as a method of understanding the relations between knowledge, power and institutions and also uses Nietzsche’s notion of the will to power, reinterpreting it as the will to truth. This article argues that despite the renewed study of Nietzsche by

key thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century, these thinkers might have buried aspects of his philosophy that could help to understand rock art and that, therefore, would require excavation.

## 2.2 Gilles Deleuze

Deleuze, mentioned earlier in relation to becoming-animal, is heavily indebted to Nietzsche in various ways, not least in his use of the idea of the “eternal recurrence” and the “will to power” in the sense of creative activity and the affirmation of life. To what extent does Deleuze’s notion of becoming-animal illuminate the becoming-animal of the shaman in a trance dance? Deleuze and Guattari describe (1987: 246) the philosopher-writer as a sorcerer who lives on the margins of society in the chapter on “Becoming-intense, becoming-animal ...” in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Alain Beaulieu (2011: 71) explains how the philosopher has to deterritorialise him-/herself – to become an animal in order to discover new ways of thinking. In a sense, then, the sorcerer, as Deleuze sees this figure, can be equated with shamans in hunter-gatherer societies, who use art, both rock painting and the trance dance, to deterritorialise themselves in a process of becoming-animal. The sorcerer more closely resembles the North American lone vision quester shaman than the San communal trance dancer. As fascinating as Deleuze’s account of becoming-animal is, it does not, however, appear to cast much light on prehistoric trance dances and rock art.

It should be noted, however, that “Becoming-animal is only one becoming among others” for Deleuze: “A kind of order or apparent progression can be established for the segments of becoming in which we find ourselves; becoming-woman, becoming-child; becoming-animal, -vegetable, or – mineral; becomings molecular of all kinds, becomings-particles” (1987: 272). Deleuze and Guattari give a key position to becoming-woman in the process of becoming animal, indeed, in any becoming. As Beaulieu puts it, “we can say that [Deleuze and Guattari] are referring to a ‘female energy’ present in the whole universe” (2011: 76), an insight that appears to resonate with the work of the following theorist.

## 2.3 Camille Paglia

In *Sexual Personae* (1990), Camille Paglia makes use of Nietzsche’s distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian/Bacchanalian to analyse the development of Western art from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. However, she prefers the term “chthonian” since she believes “Dionysian/Bacchanalian” has lost its original sense of savagery and horror. She does not explicitly state that she derives the terms from Nietzsche, although this connection will be clear to many people, nor does she acknowledge Schopenhauer. She does develop Nietzsche’s distinction further though: she

relates the Apollonian – with its connotations of sunlight, culture, rationality and individuality – to men and relates the chthonian – with its connotations of darkness, nature, irrationality and lack of individuality – to women.

The subtitle of Paglia's book – *Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* – also erases the prehistory of Western art, even though in the earlier part of her book (1990: 66), she makes much of a contrast between the famous bust of the Egyptian Queen Nefertiti and the prehistoric statuette of the Venus of Willendorf (or the Woman of Willendorf) (fig. 4). According to Paglia, the Venus of Willendorf exemplifies the chthonian since the figure is faceless, anonymous, virtually formless and unindividuated (p. 55). Whereas for Paglia, the precise lines and exaggerated eyes of the bust of Nefertiti represent artists' attempts to impose form on the formlessness of nature, the faceless and formless statuette of the Venus of Willendorf represents the abundance and fecundity of nature. Paglia's equation of the chthonian with women and nature may be criticised as essentialist, but it provides an interesting twist to the centrality that Deleuze and Guattari give, as discussed above, to becoming-woman in all becomings, and Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2005: 267) link passage through the vortex with passage through the uterus. The Apollonian can be seen as an attempt to impose a static form and identity onto matter, whereas feminine matter – a creative, dynamic energy – always resists such attempts. However, while Paglia uses Nietzsche's distinction to analyse this particular piece of prehistoric art, it does not seem to illuminate much of the cave paintings of Europe, which mainly depict animals, nor the specificities of North American and southern African rock art. The idea of fecundity may resonate with the key concept of potency in San myth and ritual although there is no evidence that this was associated with a universal female energy. Nonetheless, the rain maiden in San society may be an exception, since here rain, fat, fecundity, fruition and potency are linked (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004: 154).

## 2.4 The Early Nietzsche's Tragic Vision

Even though Nietzsche was writing specifically about Ancient Greek tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*, if there is any psychological truth to his distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian, the human experiences that he describes should apply to all humans, including prehistoric humans. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes (1956: 102-103) the actors and audience of true Greek tragedy as identifying with the infinite fecundity of the universal will and ceasing to care about individual phenomenal existence. Indeed, Nietzsche argues that true tragedy – inspired by music – does not attempt to represent phenomena but expresses the ground being of the world – the universal will (p. 106). The mature Nietzsche did not abandon the Apollonian/Dionysian distinction, although he did come to

reject Kant's (1968: 300-306) notion of the thing-in-itself. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes:

The word "Dionysian" means: an urge to unity, a reaching out beyond personality, the everyday, society, reality, across the abyss of transitoriness: a passionate-painful overflowing into darker, fuller, more floating states; an ecstatic affirmation of the total character of life as that which remains the same, just as powerful, just as blissful, through all change; the great pantheistic sharing of joy and sorrow that sanctifies and calls good even the most terrible and questionable qualities of life; the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction.

(Nietzsche 1968: 539)

How far can Nietzsche's distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian illuminate shamanism and prehistoric rock art? For one, his theory of tragedy seems more applicable to the trance dance – where the participants use music and movement to seek some mystical union – than to the rock art. The fact that San trance dancing was communal echoes the fact that, for Nietzsche, the anonymous Dionysian chorus, rather than the individual actor, was the source of the power and essence of tragedy. In Nietzsche's terms, the rock art would presumably not be a mere representation of phenomena (although entoptics and hallucinations are also phenomena) but an attempt to express an ecstatic union with the universal will. Also, as in Nietzsche's idea of tragedy, the power behind San art is not transcendent but immanent – it suffuses the whole world.

Although shamanistic trance dance and entry into the spirit world could be explained as an expression of the Dionysian celebration of (or desire for) ecstasy and unity as opposed to the fragile individualism and rationalism of the Apollonian there are several objections to using Nietzsche in this way. The first objection is the historical and cultural particularity of Nietzsche's terms, since he developed them in relation to ancient Greek tragedy (although as psychological truths they could have a more universal application). Second, Nietzsche's theory applies to agrarian rather than hunter-gatherer societies – Dionysus was a god of agriculture and intoxication. Third, as Whitley has pointed out, the trance dance experience was not ecstatic but, rather, painful and frightening. Referring to Mircea Eliade's influential *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, he writes that "the equation of shamanic trance and ecstasy became codified in our Western intellectual consciousness ever since. Yet this can only be true if we define ecstasy in a fashion that inverts the meaning of the word, rendering it meaningless" (Whitley 2009: 193). Nonetheless, as Laurence Coupe points out (p. 51), Eliade's creation model of myth is more applicable to prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies than the fertility model; archaic humans believed in hierophany (p. 52), that is, a dialectic between sacred and profane, or an

eternal recurrence of creation (the sacred) in the profane (everyday, fallen phenomena) (p. 53). Finally, it is doubtful that the San shamans were seeking mystical and ecstatic unity in their trance dances and in their rock painting; instead, they appear to have been attempting to access the potency of the supernatural world. Thus, perhaps not surprisingly, Nietzsche's theory of tragedy does not appear to illuminate much of what the shamans were trying to do.

## 2.5 Schopenhauer's Will to Life

Nonetheless, this line of explanation is not necessarily a dead end, especially if one excavates a bit deeper into the layers of Western philosophy. Nietzsche's indebtedness to Schopenhauer is not readily admitted or even recognised by Nietzsche's followers. However, many aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy cannot be understood except in relation to – often in rebellion against – Schopenhauer's philosophy. Nussbaum claims (2006: 345) that in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche pays homage to Schopenhauer, even as he begins to undermine him. In this book, Nietzsche mentions Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, where Schopenhauer identifies Kant's *phenomenon* (the thing as it appears to be) with representation and his *noumenon* (the thing as it is, or reality) with the "will to life". Nietzsche goes further and equates Schopenhauer's representation with the Apollonian and the universal will to life with the Dionysian. He equates the plastic and representational arts and individual singing with the Apollonian and communal dancing, music and tragedy with the Dionysian. As discussed above, this distinction is central to Paglia's analysis of Western art.

It can be argued that both Nietzsche and Paglia obscure Schopenhauer's metaphysical distinction between will and representation, noumenon and phenomenon, by clothing it in the mythical form of individual Greek gods, since they try to represent in concrete, individual form the noumenon, which, by definition, is beyond representation and unknowable. In Schopenhauer's philosophy, the noumenon is nothing less than the will to life shared by all phenomenal beings – and not just living beings, a point that will be returned to later. The will to life, or universal will, is the ceaseless, procreative "energy" of the universe (for want of a better term to represent the unrepresentable), blind and without purpose, expressing itself in individual existences or phenomenal beings that consume each other in order to survive (1969: 161). The noumenon is undifferentiated and uncaused but is the underlying reality behind all existence. It is the unmoved mover in a godless universe, the eternal Being that expresses itself in individual, transitory beings.

This noumenal "realm" is not home to a loving and personal divinity but the source of a fierce and impersonal, endlessly generative "energy", an

endless cycle of life and death, and would appear to correspond with what Whitley describes as a “fierce power” (2009: 179) in relation to shamanism. While the term “energy” can also be considered as an attempt to represent the unrepresentable, it is nonetheless an explanatory myth that posits the unity of all life and the prevalence of a vital force that would have been evident in the environment and daily life of the prehistoric hunter-gatherers. Lewis-Williams writes that “[i]n North America, supernatural power was associated with sexual potency, and shamans were believed to be especially virile” (2002: 175). Whitley also points out the frequent sexual imagery in rock art, a fact that reinforces the sense of the potency of the spirit world. This agrees with Schopenhauer’s insight that the sexual impulse is the strongest manifestation of the will to life (1969: 238, 276). Thus the shamanistic trance dance did not involve a blissful union with God or an ecstatic entrance into paradise but a painful battle with the forces of a fierce spirit world, the potency of which was nonetheless needed to help ensure an uncertain survival in ordinary life.

The article argues that it is precisely this will, an aspect of daily existence and a universal animating force, that the shamans intuited as “supernatural potency” and tried to access through their trance dances and their rock art. It is this metaphysical “potency” that is the central concern of their myths and rock paintings, the invisible reality to which shaman artists gave imaginative form. Lewis-Williams’s description of the supernatural world behind the “veil” of the rock face (2002: 149; 2003: 57; 2004: 98, 180) strongly resonates with Schopenhauer’s description of the phenomenal world as “the veil of Maya”, the Hindu goddess of illusion, concealing the noumenal reality behind appearances. Of course, the shamans were mistaken in their enterprise of acquiring supernatural potency, since the only will one can directly control is one’s own, although, through their trance dances and rock art, they managed indirectly to manipulate the behaviour of the community members.

The various San tribes did appear to believe in a Creator god, although this figure was more a trickster-deity than an ineffable Being, and displayed many human foibles but also possessed supernatural, shamanistic powers – indeed, he was seen as the original shaman. /Kaggen, as he was called by the /Xam, was morally neutral too; he hindered people as much as he helped them, especially when protecting the eland from hunters (2004: 112-113). This fact agrees with the morally neutral will to life posited by Schopenhauer, as is /Kaggen’s link to potency (the universal will being the ultimate source of potency in the universe). The French missionaries Arbousset and Daumas described the San belief in a supreme god in the following terms: “one does not see him with the eyes, but knows him with the heart” (2003: 43). In Schopenhauer’s terms, god is not perceived as a phenomenon but intuited as the noumenon, the universal will to life and ground of all being. /Kaggen is also called the Mantis, one of the gods’

incarnations, who appears in several San myths (but is not depicted in paintings). Indeed, the mantis was sometimes considered (mistakenly) to be the “Hottentots’ god”. It is unclear why the mantis should represent the San trickster-deity and supreme god, but there is perhaps no better animal, the mantis being a ferocious predator, to symbolise Schopenhauer’s insatiable will to life, the creatures of which feed off each other in order to live. The female mantis is known to start devouring her mate even while they are copulating and newly hatched mantis siblings immediately begin eating each other. They eat their prey alive, holding their victims in their powerful spiked arms. Lewis-Williams points out, however, that Mantis was a partially misleading translation of /Kaggen and that the trickster-deity had many avatars (Lewis-Williams 1997: 201). Nonetheless, the mantis, as a highly effective predator, epitomised both the hunter’s and, since it could fly, the shaman’s ability to access the spirit realm.

What is the basis, then, of Schopenhauer’s belief in a universal will? His starting point is Kant’s “thing-in-itself”, or noumenon, a realm beyond the phenomenal world, not subject to time, space and causality. He claims that we have intuitive knowledge of the noumenon because we *are* (part of) this reality (1969: 103). In the crucial eighteenth chapter of *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 1*, Schopenhauer uses the example of raising one’s arm, which appears to oneself and to others as a phenomenal event; but which, in addition, one intuitively knows to be an expression of one’s own volition. The will is the “inner” aspect of any “outer” physical state or movement, since, for Schopenhauer, all physical objects are appearances (phenomena), conditioned by the categories of time, space and causality. Thus, for Schopenhauer, will is always embodied and immanent in the phenomenal universe; for him the idea of a disembodied will (or spirit) would be an absurdity. He denied that there could be a causal relationship between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, causality applying only to the phenomenal world. Thus plurality and individuation belong to the phenomenal world, whereas the noumenal world is singular and undifferentiated. Phenomenal beings are temporary expressions of the permanent, underlying noumenal reality.

One of the stranger implications of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics is that it posits the will to life as the reality behind even inanimate things. However, it should be remembered that the term “will to life” is metaphorical, since the noumenon is strictly speaking unrepresentable, and could equally well be considered a type of metaphysical “energy” much like the shamanistic idea of “potency”. This may cast some illumination on the importance of quartz crystal to shamans throughout the world, since the quartz appears to possess an inner spiritual light, and thus a supernatural power (Lewis-Williams 2002: 176-177; 2004: 12-13): the numinous is imagined to be luminous. This is evident when sparks are produced when quartz is struck. In San communities, quartz is associated with rain, hail and water, and is thus an



important shamanistic possession (Lewis-Williams 2004: 143-144). Lewis-Williams also argues that the shininess of quartz represents the entoptic phenomena of the first stage of altered consciousness (2002: 18-19).

One may object to reducing a rich and textured system of myth and cosmology such as that of the San to a metaphysical system such as Schopenhauer's. However, it can be argued, as Schopenhauer did, that mythology is just the clothing of deeper metaphysical truths. Indeed, Schopenhauer claimed that the Christian myth of the Fall, Crucifixion, Grace and Redemption was reducible to his system. The original sin is being born into the world, a fall into existence (1969: 355). He equated Adam with the affirmation of the will, for which he was punished, and Christ with grace, the denial of the will (1969: 405). He found proof for his pessimism in the fact that the central symbol of Christianity is the crucified Christ. He believed that "true" Christianity shared with the Far Eastern religions the central belief that life is suffering and that salvation consists in renunciation.

Whitley (2009) contrasts the Judeo-Christian "state of grace" approach to binary opposites in Western culture to the more pessimistic state of dynamic tension of these opposites in shamanistic cultures, held in uneasy balance by the shaman (p. 182) without any resolution or synthesis (pp. 181-182). This "fierce power" (p. 179) Whitley calls "metaphysical" (p. 182): "supernatural power was considered the ultimate causative agent in the universe" (p. 180). Whitley writes:

Trance was critical to the emergence of religious practice not because it necessarily resulted in transcendence or promoted religiosity (reverence for the divine) but because it activated, and explained, the ethereal half-reality created by our perception. Shamans used trance to call the primordial spirits from this half-reality, spirits whose existence was perceived by all humans in daily experience.

(Whitley 2009: 210)

This may appear to contradict Schopenhauer's use of the language of grace and salvation. However, for Schopenhauer, salvation was a rare and temporary state, with no final resolution, much as Whitley describes the case to be for shamanism.

## 2.6 Nietzsche's Will to Power

Schopenhauer's own theory of art involved a version of Kantian disinterested contemplation of beauty, but in Schopenhauer's metaphysical terms (1969: 185, 205), whereas Nietzsche's involved the active creation of art (1968: 424). It is argued here that Nietzsche's general attitude to art – that the creation of art gives meaning to the pain and complexity of existence – as opposed to his more specific theory of the birth of tragedy, is closer to shaman trance dances and rock art than Schopenhauer's more

passive approach. Also, his will to power can explain both the shamans' desire to control supernatural potency and the way they used their shamanistic powers for political ends. For not only did the shamans try to harness the potency of the spirit world, but their ability to enter trance states (and therefore the spirit world) can be seen as an ability that gave them status and therefore power in their communities. It is likely that these two notions of power, the metaphysical and the political, were conflated in the shamanistic idea of potency. Nietzsche's notion of the will to power aptly characterises the shamans' journeys into the spirit world, which are characterised by an imagined battle of wills – the wills of which individual creatures are the phenomenal manifestations.

As has been shown in this article, following Lewis-Williams's complex theory, rock art was much more than mere art. It involved a whole complex of religious, metaphysical and cosmological beliefs and was central to the life of San communities; indeed, they believed that the success of everyday activities (hunting, healing and rain-making) depended on the shamanic activities. By making "art" and meaning-making central to human activity, Nietzsche's emphasis on the centrality of art seems to capture the importance of rock art to the hunter-gatherer communities – art as religion or religion as art:

Art and nothing but art! It is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life.

...

Art as the *redemption of the sufferer* – as the way to states in which suffering is willed, transfigured, deified, where suffering is a form of great delight.

(Nietzsche 1968: 452; italics in original)

Thus, while Nietzsche seems to have accepted Schopenhauer's analysis of the thing-in-itself as will, and agreed that it involved pain and suffering, he differed mainly in his attitude towards the suffering entailed by existence: "my instinct went into the opposite direction from Schopenhauer's: towards a *justification of life*, even at its most terrible, ambiguous, and mendacious; for this I had the formula '*Dionysian*'" (1968: 521; italics in original). Ultimately, the shamans, too, as is evident in their trance dance and rock art, affirmed rather than renounced the suffering and pain of existence, and through their creativity, tried to control it. Even if the shaman's rock art may be based on delusions, this demonstrates people's willingness to privilege the lie or the illusion over the truth: "he rejoices as an artist, he enjoys himself as power, he enjoys the lie as his form of power" (1968: 452). For Nietzsche, though, "[t]he scientific prejudice" is itself an illusion: "[t]he biggest fable of all is the fable of knowledge" (p. 301).

## Conclusion

To sum up, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's philosophies of will appear to illuminate several aspects of what the shaman rock artists were trying to do. In the broadest sense, they were motivated by what Schopenhauer called humanity's need for metaphysics or what Nietzsche saw as the need for art. More specifically, in Schopenhauer's terms, they were attempting to access the power (potency) of the universal will to life. In Nietzsche's terms, they were exercising the will to power, their power of willing over the wills of others: spirit animals, natural animals and the people in their communities. Finally, the art of the shamans – both their dancing and their painting – was an attempt to create meaning and bring order to the flux of phenomenal experience and to the pain of existence. The shamans were not trying to assert intellectual control over phenomena through their art – their dancing and their rock painting – but to assert the power of their wills over the noumenal reality behind phenomena, thereby controlling aspects of the phenomenal world through the noumenal.

The idea of spirits – embodied or disembodied – and of a spirit or supernatural realm are easily criticised as archaic and pre-scientific attempts to understand the workings of the world. However, the notion of volition, especially as developed by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, provides a metaphysical (and psychological) justification for such beliefs. Lewis-Williams rightly considers the shamanic belief in a spirit world beyond the “veil” or “membrane” of the rock face as mistaken. Indeed, thanks to neuroscience, we can understand the neurological and, therefore, the material basis of altered states of consciousness. However, this concerns the phenomenal realm, whereas the shamans were not concerned directly with the phenomenal realm as much as they were with the noumenal, a reality not as amenable to the methods of science.

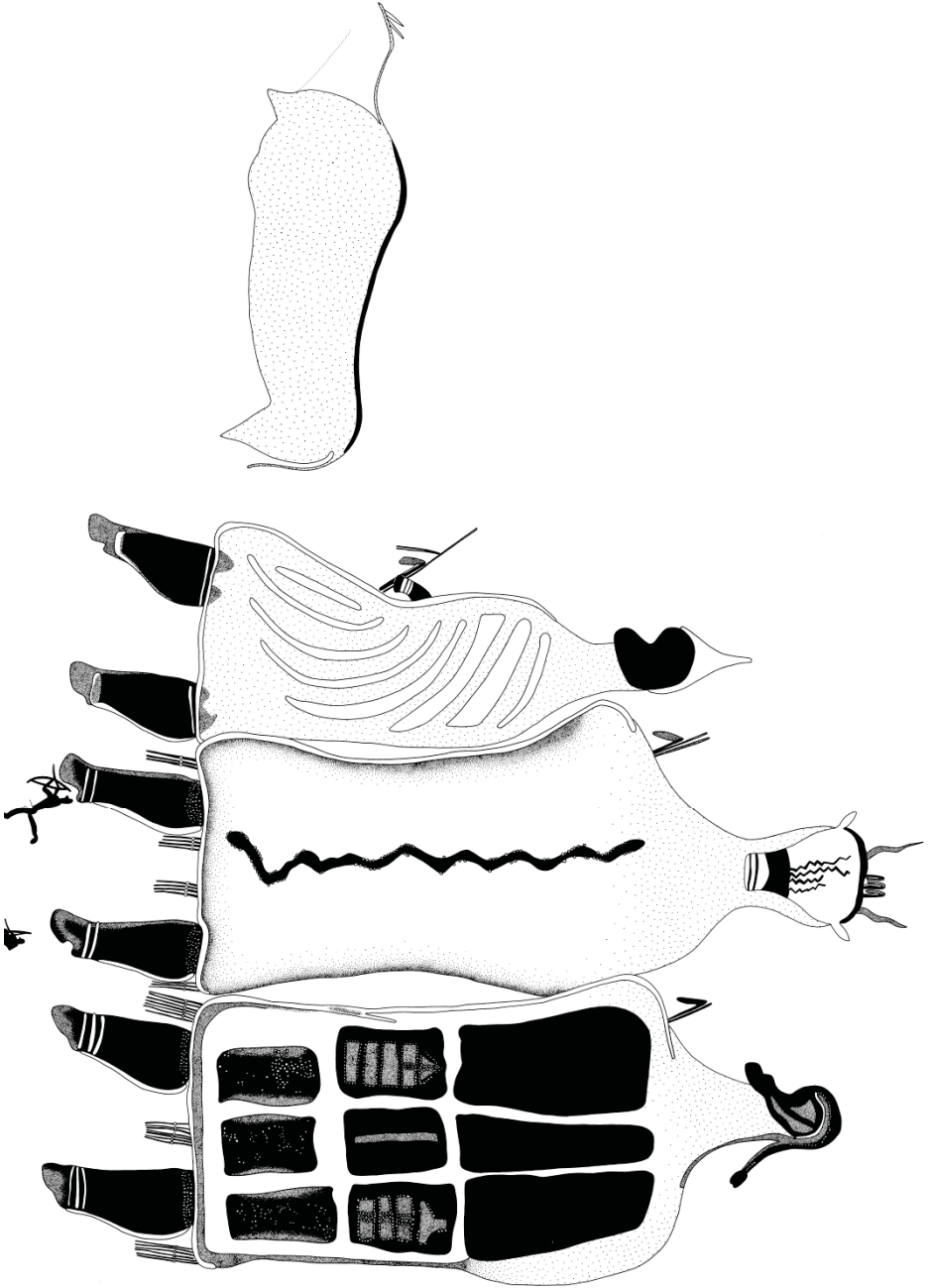


Fig. 1

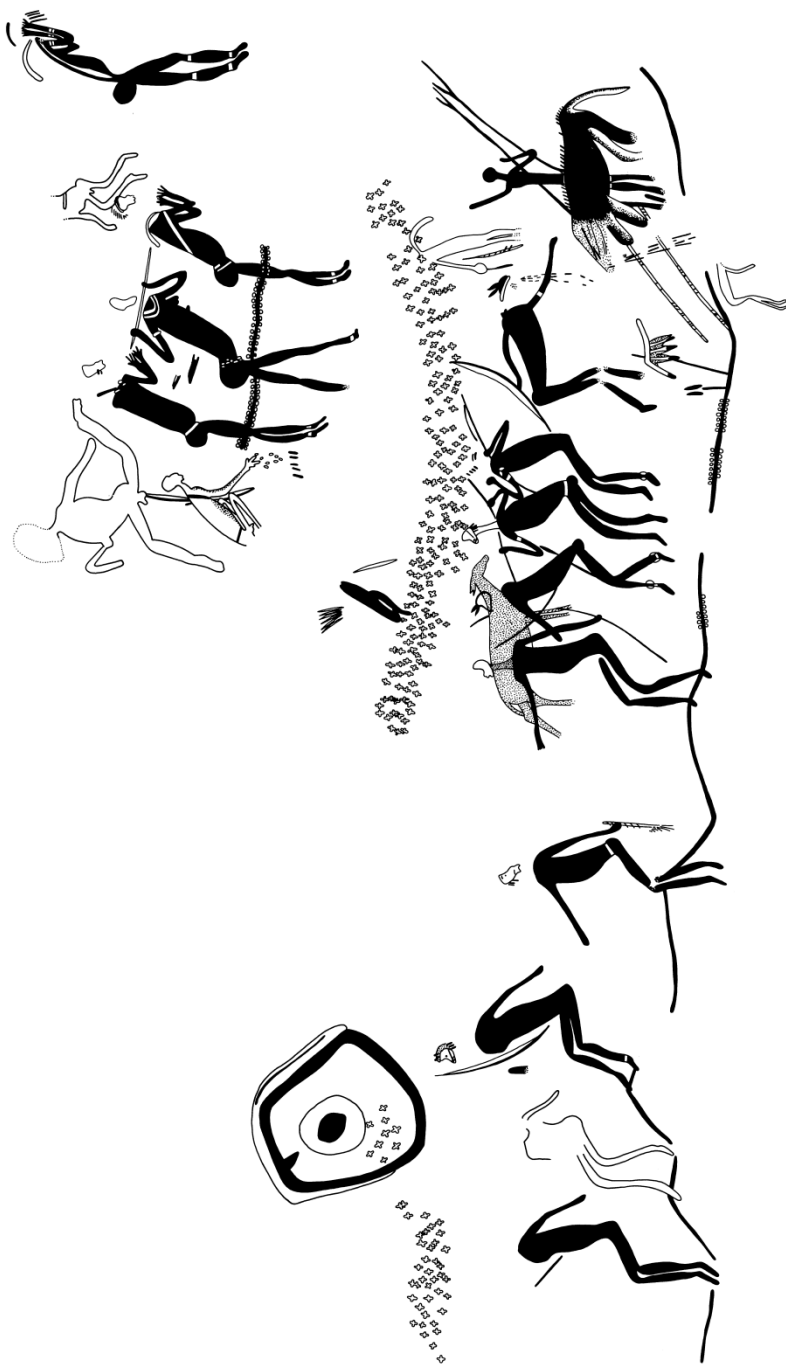


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



**Fig. 4**

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